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Stefania Barca 2010 Enclosing water: Nature and political economy in a Mediterranean valley, 1796–1916

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Water power has been of enormous importance in what we call now the Industrial Revolution. In England, the first factories exploited water flows with water wheels to power the machines producing cloth and other manufactured goods. Obviously, the Industrial Revolution transformed relations between people, but also relations between people and the environment. In *Enclosing water: Nature and political economy in a Mediterranean valley, 1796–1916*, Stefania Barca discusses this double transformation in the Liri Valley, a small riverine area in southern Italy. This “Manchester of the Two Sicilies” provides the stage to show how industrialization and the natural environment were closely connected, and provided the conditions for each others’ development.

The book reads like a travel narrative, especially in the beginning. We start with late eighteenth century travelers’ accounts of the Liri Valley as a “delightful place.” We encounter paintings with lovely waterfalls, and we may want to find this valley ourselves in seeking rest from our busy lives; and yet, Barca shows that at the end of the eighteenth century, the valley was already being altered, with water mills and feeder canals a clear part of the landscape. In the years to come, however, the valley and its waterways were to be improved, based on new, modern ideas brought in the Age of Revolution and the Napoleonic era. The old feudal rule with its social regulations blocking human options for improving environmental conditions—these “barbaric irrational customs”—was replaced with a system of private property, which could restore nature in order to make full benefit of it.

Barca shows the historical roots of these discussions to illustrate that the discourse was not about humans versus nature, with nature being the entity to be tamed. Rather the discourse was much more about certain socio-political arrangements—in this case the feudal ones—which were framed as allowing nature to degrade. The state of the natural environment was partially a product of the lack of proper social arrangements. The human-environmental connection we as historians like to emphasize was already used in these political discussions in the early nineteenth century.

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In chapters three and four, Barca provides a detailed narrative of the many developments that took place in the valley, and the complex links between several parallel processes. Developing more and larger water mills coincided with changing labor relations, but also with changes in agricultural production. One result was increased siltation in the river, which caused all kinds of problems for the mills, and forced mill owners try different strategies to address this problem, including changing the river, thus creating new hydrological realities such as floods. The narrative Barca provides is captivating, depressing, and highly entertaining at the same time. Barca clearly shows that the tragedy of the commons in the Liri Valley is not so much a tragedy of common rules not being adhered to, but a tragedy of private property not being able to bring the profits and the better environment its proponents had promised. Furthermore, although the consequences for the valley's socio-natural environment were recognized by the state, that same state did not have the power or the financial resources to actually intervene.

Barca has written a convincing story of the messy relations between human actions, natural environments, economic conditions, social arrangements, and ideologies. Actually, she shows that such words are wrong per definition, as they only deal with a small piece of an integrated puzzle and each word hides a complex relationship between humans and nature. It is words we have to use though, and in the 180 or so pages of this book, Barca has used them to compose an inspiring—if at times a bit baroque—exploration of the changes in the Liri Valley, which begs many important questions to be answered in future environmental histories.

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